

Many things can influence a child, including friends, teachers and the things they see when they sit in front of the TV or computer. If you're a parent, know that your everyday behavior plays a big part in shaping your child's behavior, too. With your help, kids can learn to develop healthy eating and physical activity habits that last throughout their lives.

Healthy eating and physical activity are essential for children of any age. "Good nutrition and physical activity are important for building strong bones and muscles and feeling good about yourself," says Dr. Lynne Haverkos, a child development specialist at NIH. "Some research suggests that physical activity might even help improve children's thinking and mental functions."

Getting active and eating right may also prevent excess weight and childhood obesity, a growing concern in this country. Today, nearly one in three children in the United States is overweight or obese. "Being overweight puts a lot of stress on joints, muscles, bones and the heart, and it increases your risk for certain diseases," Haverkos says. "We're also finding that overweight toddlers are more likely to become overweight middle schoolers, high schoolers and then adults. That's why it's important to take action early."

Although most of us know that it's a good idea to eat healthy food and move more, it isn't always easy to do. Children

SHAPE

Your Family's Habits

HELPING KIDS MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES



aren't likely to change their diet and activity habits on their own. It's up to you to make it easier for your family to make healthy choices.

"Parents are very important in terms of arranging an environment and setting a model for healthy or unhealthy behavior," says Dr. Leonard H. Epstein, an expert on childhood obesity at the University of Buffalo. "Parents bring foods into the house. They control how much time a child can watch TV. They control what kinds of social activities are paired with foods. And kids learn a huge amount

about eating and physical activity from watching and imitating their parents."

Epstein's research shows how important parents can be. In NIH-funded work, his team assigned obese children, ages 8 to 12, to different types of weight loss programs. All the groups were taught about healthy diet, behaviors and exercise. For some groups, positive feedback and encouragement for weight loss and behavior changes were given only to the child. Other groups focused on both the child and an obese parent. Comparison groups received little feedback.

CONTINUED
ON NEXT PAGE

SHAPE

Your Family's Habits

(Continued from previous page)

Stay Positive, Stay Healthy

If your child doesn't like a new food right away, stay positive and keep trying over time. Encouraging kids to take just one bite of a new food can help. But avoid creating conflicts and stress over it. Several studies show that kids are more likely to try a new food if they're eating in a setting that's relaxing and pleasant.

Children under the age of three tend to stop eating on their own when they're full. But after age three, the more you put on their plate, the more they'll eat. So make sure to give your kids child-size portions.

Several studies show that parents can effectively influence healthy behaviors by

talking in a positive way or avoiding certain situations altogether. When you bring unhealthy food and sugary drinks into the house, "parents essentially become the food police," adds Epstein. "It's easier to create an environment in the home where there's limited access to unhealthy foods and lots of access to healthy foods."

Experts recommend that most kids get at least an hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. Parents can help by limiting TV and computer time to no more than 1 or 2 hours per day. When it comes to food and physical activity, what you say and do around your children can have a lasting effect. Work together as a family to make healthy habits easy and fun.



Help Kids Form Healthy Habits

- Be a role model. Eat healthy family meals together. Walk or ride bikes instead of watching TV or surfing the Web.
- Make healthy choices easy. Put nutritious food where it's easy to see. Keep balls and other sports gear handy.
- Focus on fun. Play in the park, or walk through the zoo or on a nature trail. Cook a healthy meal together.
- Limit screen time. Don't put a TV in your child's bedroom. Avoid snacks and meals in front of the TV.
- Check with caregivers or schools. Make sure they offer healthy foods, active playtime and limited TV or video games.
- Change a little at a time. If you drink whole milk, switch to 2% milk for a while, then try even lower fat milks. If you drive everywhere, try walking to a nearby friend's house, then later try walking a little farther.